

## PRIMARY ADAPTATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY

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open to human occupation by the drying of the land, the burning of the spear grass, and the disappearance of the swarms of vicious insects, these smaller groups coalesce into larger units which may contain as many as thirty or forty people and will contain many more if a large ritual is being celebrated. Every member of this group is related closely to at least one or more other individuals in the group, but to the rest he is only tribally related. Where the sea-turtle eggs on the sand beaches are most plentiful, the oyster beds most prolific and accessible, sea-bird eggs most abundant, lily and yam swamps most productive, and the cycad palm nuts ripened and ready for picking, there will be found the horde groups.

All of the people in the horde will be of friendly clans which are usually closely intermarried; if there are antagonisms they are suppressed or given expression in a peace-making makarata, which allows those involved to remain in harmony. As soon as food is plentiful the better areas usually become locations for the great rituals which take place at this time; the ceremonial life definitely enlarges the size of the horde groups. The camp of the horde is organized spatially in the same way as the clan lands are spatially related to each other.

Ritual sanctions at this time help prevent open strife, which is always a possibility whenever the clans come together. The belief that the totem will be offended if clashes occur between opposing clansmen usually keeps the peace. Ritual sanction, then, is the most powerful force in regulating the peaceful behavior of these larger food-gathering hordes. If it were not for these extreme sanctions the larger hordes could not be formed. Peoples with a background of feud and warfare who might not otherwise risk meeting one another can be fairly certain of peace in a horde gathered for a ritual. Since the local clans which start the ceremony have it well under way and the totemic emblems have been made and are in the camp by the time the first guests arrive, hesitant visitors can feel comparatively safe in coming to the ceremony. The bitterly antagonistic clans, however, who have a continuous blood feud tradition and a record of killing back of them would never be present unless under extreme circumstances; for religious sanctions or peace-making duels would not prevent open strife and possible secret killings between them.

The horde, then, is governed by the seasonal fluctuation of plenty or scarcity, and its extreme in size is effected by the attractive stimuli of important ceremonies.

The usual division of labor obtains during the period of the larger

## MURNGIN TOTEMISM

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presents, such as spears, hair belts, spear-throwers, and other valued articles, to the boy. Most of these things are later presented to the father, older brothers, gawel, and mari. If the boy were not treated liberally his clan would be offended, and it might lead to an open feud; but the people in the clans visited are always generous and such cause for a feud is never given. While the boy is away the women gather yams, lily bulbs, and other vegetable food to prepare for their guests. Many of the visitors come with the boy when he returns, while others precede him to participate in the preliminary ceremonies.

3. When the neophyte arrives in camp, or frequently before he comes back, the Warn-gai-tja is erected in the center of the main camp where all the people live. Two poles about six feet long are cut from trees (of any variety) in the old men's ground and tied together. A bunch of leaves is tied to the top of each pole. If three boys are to be initiated, three poles are cut and tied together; if only one boy is to be circumcised, only one pole. Grass is strewn on the ground around the foot of the pole. The sticks are Dua and the leaves are Yiritja.

The general camp of both the men and women is called Wonga. In the center of it, or sometimes at the side of this ground if better suited for dancing, is the general dance ground. The warn-gaitja is located in the center of the dance floor. It is here that men and women dance. This is the only part of the ceremonial ground to which women and uncircumcised boys have access. It is sometimes called Wakinu Wonga, which can be translated as "the camp of those who do not belong," and is used in a contemptuous sense (see pages 110-113).

The men bring the warn-gaitja into the main camp from the men's ground. They carry their spears pointing downward and beat time against the shafts with their spear-throwers. They sing meanwhile:

"War-li-mar-la din-ya

War-li-mar-la din-ya

(Dua sticks of the warn-gaitja)

Warn-gai-tja ngu-lai-ngu-lai

Warn-gai-tja ngu-lai-ngu-lai"

(Yiritja leaves of the warn-gaitja)

The following songs are also sung:

(1) Stone spear

(2) Camp made by Wawilak Sisters in the Garl-ban-uk country  
(Gun-al-pia)

## A BLACK CIVILIZATION

- 852 (3) Bamboo spear with stone head (Gun-na-mar-mar)  
 833 (4) Women and boys (Mielk koon-di Djer-ku-li)  
 (5) Fat of the kangaroo mixed with red ocher to paint the boy's face (Ri-djil-gur-o)  
 (6) The taboo name for the warngaitja (Ngur-mir-go-nor-mi-a)

During the singing and dancing the warngaitja is carried in the center of the group of men.

[535] The women meet them and, while the men stand in a compact circle, they dance around them waving branches. The pole is taken to various parts of the camp and the men form circles around it and sing the above cycle of songs while the women dance around them. Finally a permanent place in the center of the main camp is selected, and after singing once more over the warngaitja, it is placed upright on the ground and left there until the end of the Djungguan ceremony.

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361 When a Djungguan is being celebrated a Murngin camp is divided into several geographical divisions. These territorial divisions are based on the age-grade groupings which are discussed in Chapter IV. The geographical divisions are (1) the general camp, (2) the men's ground, (3) the old men's camp and totem house, (4) the "totem well," or temporary dwelling place of the totemic emblem for one portion of the ceremony, and (5) the snake dance ground.

The territorial division clearly objectifies the grading in the men's association and the differentiation from women: the old men's camp, the holy of holies for the few; the dance ground for the circumcised, which includes the greater part of the young men; and the main camp for the uncircumcised and the women.

779 The men's ground is called Djungguan Wonga (camp). It is also called Ma-rai-in Wonga. Maraiin is a general word meaning, as nearly as it can be translated, powerful, sacred, taboo, or spiritual. It is used to describe anything that is taboo to the women and uninitiated boys. It is not necessarily taboo to everyone in the tribe. Totemic emblems, ceremonial grounds which certain age grades are forbidden, "sacred" names known only to the older men, and certain designs are among the things that are considered maraiin by the Murngin.

A quality possessed by a thing that is maraiin is dal. The literal translation of dal is "hard" and "strong," but dal means strength only in the magical sense of ritually "powerful." The maraiin wonga has a considerable amount of dal, but the old men's camp possesses a concentrated portion of this magical strength. The old men's part of the

## MURNGIN ARTIFACTS

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excavated. Paper bark is usually placed in the hole and is also used as a covering during cold nights.

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[513]

With the exception of the lean-to variety of Types 4 and 5, all of the above huts are constructed for the rainy season. Because of the thicknesses of paper bark, they keep completely dry, even in the heavy tropical rains. The natives never build in advance in preparation for the rainy period. Nothing is done when the clouds first appear, even though it is realized that the rain may be upon them in a few hours. When it is decided that the rain will start within the next half hour or hour, the natives watch the tide carefully. If the tide is going out it pulls the clouds out to sea; but as soon as the tide changes they start building, and usually the rain is upon them before construction is finished. Instead of being displeased at being thoroughly soaked, there is usually much merriment and they seem to enjoy the great confusion and noise. Each house usually includes but one family. The wives of a polygamous household always live under one roof.

[592]

A dry-season camp is largely a series of circles, each defined by an outline of strips of paper bark and by a border of sand that has been heaped up from excavating shallow holes for the occupants who compose a family group. No one ever walks over or through another's camp circle.

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The people along the Goyder River and the farther interior always take to the high ground as soon as the wet season starts, and when the rains appear in earnest build long communal houses out of the arched bark of the eucalyptus. This communal house is well covered with paper bark, sand, and bushes to keep out the rain, and it is also excavated in the interior and made very low so that the wind will not be able to blow through it. It has two entrances, and fires are put at each end and sometimes in the interior. Frequently this house has two ridgepoles on forked sticks, and the bark is bent over them in the same manner as for Type 4.

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*Type 6: The Pile House.*—In the Goyder and Glyde River district a special type of "pile" house with gabled superstructure and known as a "mosquito house" is constructed. No other people intensively studied by the author had this form.

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[71]

Four forked poles about eight feet high are put in the ground. Ridge poles placed in the forks connect the uprights and form a rectangle.

Cross-pieces connect the ridgepoles and make a floor. On top of these grass is put, and then a final covering of heavy paper bark.

Four uprights half again as high as the first are then set up on the corners of the platform. At the center of each end of the floor are placed two more forked uprights about one-third again as high as the last four; a ridgepole connecting these last two uprights forms the peak of the gable. Two more ridgepoles also connect the pairs of poles on each side of the house. Rafters are then put down from the highest center ridgepole to the

## ARNHEM LAND: ART, MYTH AND SYMBOLISM

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\* 532 at the lower part of his face represent his beard. In panel *b*, *Bannitja*, with many spears still embedded in him, is under the water of the Duluru-wahjalapa swamp. His body is already covered with the special designs which, later, he showed to the *jiritja* groups of north-eastern Arnhem Land. In panel *c*, *Bannitja*, now *Laitjun*, is showing those designs to the assembled *jiritja* tribesmen. To the right of *Laitjun* is the eucalyptus tree, upside-down, into which he later transformed himself. The other five figures in the same panel are those of aborigines beating the ground with the *bannitja* bundles of paper-bark. The cross-hatching to the right of *Laitjun* is the dust that rises when the aborigines beat the ground with the *bannitja*.

Plate 88B is a painting of *Laitjun*. The designs on his body are those belonging to the *dahrongu* language group (*mata*) whose land is at Blue Mud Bay. He is wearing a sacred bag around his neck and feathered bands on his arms.

Plate 89C deals with three mythical men of the *jiritja* moiety, among them being *Laitjun*. Their names are, *a*, *Kalparimu*, *b*, *Barama*, *c*, *Laitjun*. The zigzag lines joining the heads of the men together, at the feet of *a* and between *a* and *b*, depict the hair and *jiritja* string ornaments worn by the three men. The designs between *b* and *c* and to the right of *c* are those which were painted on the back of the men. Because the artist could not show the designs on the back of the figures, he has painted them alongside. The same design, which belongs to the *mungulili mata* of Blue Mud Bay, is repeated on the lower panel.

At the feet of *Barama*, *b*, is the triangular ceremonial ground<sup>58</sup> in which these three men conducted their sacred rituals. This painting deals with only a fragment of the *Laitjun* myth.

*Tjamburwal, the Thunder-man*

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[616] The thunder-man, *Tjamburwal*, is an important ancestor of the *dun* moiety of the Yirrkalla aborigines. *Tjamburwal* is the creator not only of the clouds, the stormy and the thunder, but also of the little *dun* spirit children, *jurtu*, who descend from the sky in the raindrops to become human beings.

In the early days of the world *Tjamburwal* was a giant who lived at Waranaka, an island east of the Wesel Islands. One day, as he was sitting in the shade, *Tjamburwal* saw, in the distance, a Malay prau approaching his island. Annoyed at the intrusion, he waded into the sea and, taking hold of the boat, started to pull it to land. But the Malays attacked *Tjamburwal* with a large knife, cut off both his hands, turned the boat about and sailed for home. *Tjamburwal's* hands, however, joined miraculously to his body, and soon he was again in pursuit. That time he succeeded in pulling the prau to shore and was preparing to smash it in pieces when the crew again attacked him, this time amputating his forearms. Although his arms, like his hands, joined miraculously to his body,

• [616] 58. A triangular ceremonial ground is used by the aborigines of Milingimbi in the *djunggwan* ceremonies. Warner (1937), p. 265.

8: Berndt E-5 (1946-1950) 1954

OI17 Murngin OI17

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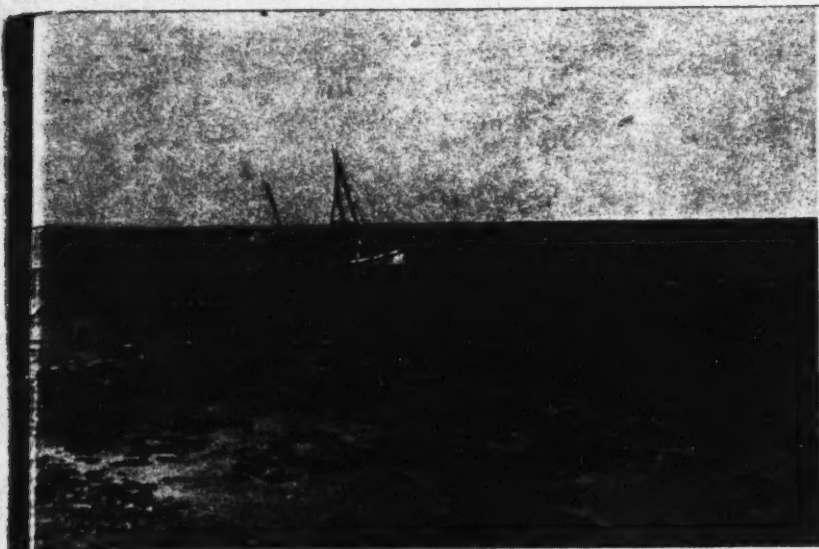


*Plate 14a: A lugger being unloaded at Elcho Island.*

*Plate 14b: Yirrkalla Mission Settlement.*

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[p. 25(I)]

## ARNHEM LAND

175 virtually encircled Arnhem Land. Static camps of natives (severely criticised in Dr Thomson's reports) were formed at all these places, so that today, and as the years pass, more and more natives look to one or more of these stations as their "home". [177] They remain in the Bush for increasingly shorter periods, finding it always harder to keep away from these centres as they come to rely on the introduced food and trade goods. And so they find it necessary to pay lip-service to Christianity.

We are not concerned here with discussing in detail missionary endeavour in this region, because this would require a great deal more space than can be spared for it here. Readers interested in this form of contact should consult the relevant Government reports, as well as those issued by the Mission bodies themselves.<sup>5</sup> No scientific study of this problem has as yet been made in Australia. Here, however, we are interested only in broad principles. More detailed discussion of Mission and administrative policies, against a background of the general Australian situation, is given by Professor Elkin in his *Citizenship for the Aborigines*.<sup>5a</sup>

175 Mission activities before the recent War were virtually confined to establishing themselves on a more or less self-supporting basis. And since they were centres of white settlement, with 177 them came many features of European culture. This is an important point to remember. These missionaries not only brought 397 certain elements of their own Christian doctrine, but also carried with them the essential ingredients of their own culture. Whether or not the missionary desired it, the acceptance of Christianity by the Aborigines thus involved their simultaneous adoption of European ways, at the expense of their own culture and their own religion. If the Aborigines wanted to live in peaceful association with these missionaries and to receive their alleged benefits in the form of food, goods and education, they were obliged either to discard their own way of life or to adjust it in some way to changing conditions. In actual practice they were left with no alternative. Conditions were unsettled, alien influences demoralising, and tribal disintegration imminent. Gradually they drifted into the stations, hoping to take advantage of their presence, and at the same time to retain their traditional heritage.

## THE PRESENT DAY

But it was not possible for any group, under the circumstances in which the Arnhem Landers found themselves, to have their cake and also to eat it. 175  
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The Missions were interested in gathering together groups of natives around the stations. Only in this way could settlements be built up, and the new ways firmly entrenched in the minds of the natives. They built houses in which to live, and churches in which to propagate their religion — for this was, after all, the main reason for their presence. Gardens were cultivated; and some of them engaged in trading; for missions had to be economically "safe", just like other forms of business. Schools at this period functioned very intermittently. Their range of subjects was limited and related primarily to religious training. Aboriginal children were not given a clear picture of European culture and its relation to the rest of the world, nor taught how to adjust themselves to these new conditions. Food was distributed either for work accomplished, or virtually as "bait" to attract natives to visit the stations, or to attend church or school. But on the whole the work of missionaries seems to have been dictated by purely humanitarian ideals. [361] ●

The functioning of their stations depended greatly on the personality of the superintendents, and on their tolerant and sympathetic understanding of Aboriginal custom and belief. The Missions were acting as bulwarks against more unpleasant aspects of European and alien contact. They did demonstrate to the natives that all Europeans were not the same, and that some had more kindly intentions than others. Missionaries attended to the sick, the aged and the young. But these early years of Mission contact were mainly occupied with "digging in", with establishing their position and developing a formula by which to approach their problems. The natives had now a refuge to which they could retreat. In spite of all this, the presence of Missions did not prevent their contact with the Japanese and the European traders. 175  
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With the first raid on Darwin on 19 February 1942, when the North was thrown into confusion, Japanese trading activities ceased. Plans were made to evacuate female missionaries (as well as civilian women and children), and many of the mixed-bloods from Croker Island and Groote Eylandt; and the whole northern 175  
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## THE PRESENT DAY

to retain the best elements in their own culture, to set them on a firm economic footing, and above all to allow them to think and act for themselves. These aspirations are, as yet, only embryonic. Whether or not they will come to fruition rests primarily on the European agencies within the boundaries of Arnhem Land, and those immediately interested in its future. 000

During the war years, then, Mission activity was at a standstill. Church services were still held, but schools and training centres are only now being properly organised. Here, again a co-ordinated plan is needed where educational activities are concerned, and recently the Commonwealth Office of Education has been paying some attention to this. 175 797

When the Armed Forces withdrew from the greater part of Arnhem Land, the Aborigines were thrown on to the resources of the Missions, and they looked to these centres to fill the gap. Now, as we have seen, many of them are coming to settle more or less permanently around the Mission settlements, and they are demanding employment so that they may maintain the standard of living to which they have grown accustomed. But so far none of the Mission stations has been able to employ all of these potential labourers, and none has adequate means of training them for this work that they desire. In present circumstances these stations can only take a certain number of employees. Before others can be absorbed, new industries must be developed. This, together with education, is one of the most urgent problems facing Missions and administrations today. Employment must be relatively permanent and also remunerative, if it is to have desirable results. There are many incidental problems to be considered as well. 797 361

Although some aspects of native traditional life are still virile today, others are showing signs of collapse. Past alien contact has left its mark on the indigenous culture. This is more obvious in western Arnhem Land than in the east, although even there certain elements have almost disappeared. But a well balanced educational approach, including occupational training, should help to arrest social and cultural disintegration, strengthen traditional ties, and provide strength to meet future demands. 178

221 pations, and therefore, on the nature of their camps and  
 805 house types. It may be noted in passing that the seasonal  
 813 influence on their lives and occupations is well appreciated  
 by the natives themselves, and that they divide the annual  
 cycle into six or more phases or seasons which they name  
 from the winds, the weather conditions, or from the food  
 supplies which characterise them. And again, they will  
 name these phases, and state without hesitation the appropriate  
 occupational sites at each of them, and their activities  
 and food supplies which depend upon these seasonal conditions,  
 with an insight and a precision that no white man who is not a  
 trained ecologist and well versed in botany and zoology, could  
 approach.

[133] During the wet season the river courses rise quickly and  
 221 soon overflow their banks so that the country is flooded for

[137] miles. The grass, especially on the plains, grows rank and

342 high—often more than six feet—and the people are concentrated  
 361 in semi-permanent wet season camps in which the

population may exceed one hundred. Here they lead an almost  
 sedentary existence in contrast with their active nomadic life in  
 the south-east season. At this time they construct houses, sometimes  
 of large size—thatched with bark of tea-tree (*Melaleuca*) or of  
 stringybark (*Eucalyptus tetro-*

[353] *donta*). Some of these houses are well built and are provided

[372] with sleeping platforms under which fires can be lighted as  
 a protection against mosquitoes. They are also equipped with

racks to carry food and utensils. Each house type has its own  
 traditional form, type of construction and distinctive name, and  
 is often developed in adaptation to a particular environment, or is  
 determined by the building materials available in the vicinity.  
 Nine or ten types of houses or shelters are recognised in  
 Arnhem Land. These vary from simple breakwinds built on the  
 windward side in the "dry"

or south-east season, and "shades" of boughs in the very 221  
 hot dry weather, to the crescentic and semi-circular houses 342  
 thatched with teatree bark, and the more elaborate rectangu- 361  
 lar huts of stringybark which are used in the wet season,  
 and are of a more or less permanent nature. The large rec- [177]  
 tangular houses were, however, probably developed or  
 modified as a result of Malay or Macassar influence.

When the flood waters subside after the storms and rains 221  
 of the north-west season, the large wet season camps break 361  
 up into small groups consisting of a few families, which dis-  
 perse to lead a nomadic life within the confines of their  
 own clan territories. Each phase, each season, has its own  
 related food supply, and this is the chief factor which deter-  
 mines the daily activities of the people and also the area in  
 which they are to be found at any time of the year. As the 221  
 season advances and the grass dries, they practise systematic 224  
 burning of the country in conjunction with their hunting  
 activities. This is not a random business; it is well organised,  
 and is carried out by the men as a communal enterprise,  
 although in a restricted and controlled manner, with  
 "drives" for kangaroos, wallabies or other game.

The actual burning of the grass is directed by the old 224  
 men of the clan, or by others who have an hereditary right, 887  
 especially by men of other clans who stand, under the kin- 614  
 ship system, in the relationship of *wäkkü* (son, woman 602  
 speaking; sister's son, man speaking) that is, men to whom  
 the clan is *yindipulo* (see pp. 11, 12). Such men are necessarily [616]  
 members of the opposite moiety, and to those unfamiliar  
 with the people, they may appear to usurp the authority, to  
 dominate the affairs, of clans to which they do not belong.  
 But it is part of the traditional behaviour in this area, that 602  
 certain people of *dua* moiety carry out some of the ritual 614  
 tasks for members of certain clans of *yiritja* moiety to which 616

carried out locally and under close control, so that the "grass burn" season conducted by each horde, or hunting group, is prolonged sufficiently to yield its full food potential over a period of weeks or months, without waste. 224

By the time the burning of the grass has been completed, another phase in the cycle is reached. The group may now follow the watercourses, which are gradually drying up, and employ the special fishing methods which tradition (backed by a long period of trial and error) has established, as being appropriate to the area and to the season. They secure fish, freshwater tortoises and snakes, by swimming "drives" and by the use of dams, weirs, traps, nets, and special poisons containing chiefly *rotenone*, *saponin* and *tephrosin*, which, as the volume of water becomes restricted, can now be used effectively to stupefy the fish. One of the most effective of the fish poisons used by these people is *moiyoŋo* (*Tephrosia leptoclada*)\* a leguminous plant with a root shaped like a small parsnip. This plant, of which specimens were examined at Rothamstead Experimental Station (Herts. England) was found to be highly toxic in solutions of 1%. Later again, the groups which have been hunting independently during the early south-east season, will converge on the few deep permanent lagoons, where the camps increase in size as they are augmented by other groups of people who have been similarly engaged in nomadic hunting. 226 227 278 (137)

At this time the chief food of the natives inland will be *n̄t̄n*, the fruit of the Cycad Palm (*Cycas media*), which in this area yields very large quantities of food. In coastal 137 262

\*A second species of *Tephrosia* hitherto undescribed, also called *moiyoŋo*, collected during the expeditions in Arnhem Land on which this work was carried out, has since been named *T. Arnhemia* by Mr. C. T. White (Government Botanist, Queensland).

461 Apart from the material for the making of spears and  
 462 spear-throwers, and the woven baskets for carrying fire-  
 sticks and other possessions, each man gradually collects,  
 incidentally, as he hunts, the raw materials used for cere-  
 [237] monial purposes, such as the orange-red breast feathers of  
 the Red-collared Lorikeet<sup>14</sup> and the fur of the Brush-tailed  
 [431] Opossum (*Trichosurus vulpecula arnhemensis*). Every man  
 thus strives to accumulate articles of value, possessions or  
*gerri* (see page 5), of the appropriate type, which he will  
 send later to relatives of certain orders within the intricate  
 exchange cycle in which he has a place (pp. 67-68). The  
 need to build up a reserve of *gerri* for use within the ex-  
 change cycle supplies still another incentive, or urge, to  
 work, and so to be ready to meet these obligations. A man,  
 therefore, must necessarily spend most of his waking time  
 in working. As a craftsman the aborigine is neat, tidy and  
 efficient, but he follows traditional methods and techniques  
 closely, because they form part of the culture pattern into  
 which he is born, and which is for him a heritage from  
 ancestral times.

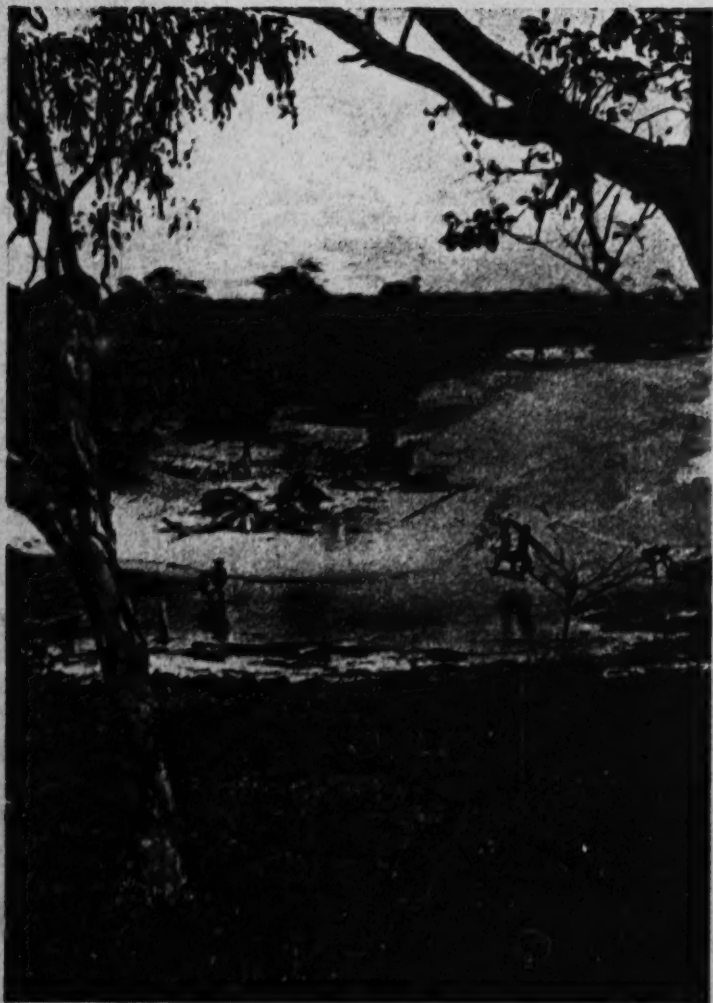
512 Let us look at the camp of a typical horde of Arnhem  
 Land in the early morning, in order to get some under-  
 standing of the way in which these people live, and a picture  
 of the daily routine of hunting and the organisation of work.  
 ● [361] The camp is situated generally on high or well-drained  
 ground, and in the dry season is merely a cluster of fires,  
 perhaps with a low breakwind on the windward side, each  
 fire marking the camp of a family, or of a group of single  
 men. In the early south-east season, during the months of

<sup>14</sup> These rich orange-red feathers of the Red-collared Lorikeet  
 (*Trichoglossus rubritorquus*) are used chiefly by clans of *dua* moiety  
 for the ornamentation of the sacred *rängga*, and are called *ijukurr*,  
 literally "fat".

15:Chaseling M-5 (ca. 1934-1936)1957

O117 Murngin O117

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YIRRKALA

The creek after which the station was named

[facing p7]

## MEN OF THE STONE AGE

Of aboriginal feet the least said the better; for they 142  
definitely give the lie to the theory that protective footwear  
spoils natural shapeliness. Toes are broken, knobbed, and  
widely spaced: this is particularly true of the first and second  
toes, by which they easily grasp and lift spears and large  
sticks or grip the rigging in climbing to the masthead of a [481]  
lugger. Hands, however, are beautifully shaped, with long  
tapering fingers, and compare more favourably with an  
average European hand.

Finally, aboriginal skin is not black, as is popularly sup-  
posed, but is in varying shades of velvety brown, for there  
are blondes and brunettes in the Arnhem Land bush.

Daily life has not changed in a thousand decades, and 361  
still involves hunting with stone and wooden spears and [411]  
stone axes for everything the nomad eats. Their camp [224]  
grounds are well known, and are usually found on sandy  
slopes or beaches, reasonably close to water but as far as  
possible from the swamps that usually swarm with mos-  
quitoes and sand-flies. A typical instance is 'Damballia' or [225]  
Breamer Island, favoured for turtle hunting and named after  
its totemic waterhole. Having heard a lot about it, I set out 312  
to see it with some boys in a canoe. I took provisions and  
water for myself and flour for the boys, but they declined my  
offer of a drum for water, remarking that the well on the  
island would supply their needs and mine too.

With a favourable wind and tide we landed on the island  
at sunrise, and whilst my billy boiled, the boys went off to  
the well for water. As I was finishing my breakfast I noticed  
an overpowering smell; and found that it came from the  
well-water they were using to mix their damper. Even then  
they steadfastly maintained that it was up to standard, and  
politely declined some of mine. I found the well to be an  
open waterhole, completely covered by pandanus palms in  
which thousands of small doves and other birds were  
roosting. Nearby were several broken-down huts, and dozens 361

## YULENGOR

- 361 of carapace scattered in the sand justified the island's reputation for good turtle hunting.

[172] Camps like this have been in use for centuries, and around several of them are hundreds of tons of shells, bones, and refuse. One mound in the Crocodile Islands is over twenty feet high and covers an area of approximately five hundred square yards; when an experimental cut was made into the centre, it was found to consist entirely of shellfish shells.

- 342 Camp shelters are the crudest imaginable. Prince Petr Kropotkin goes so far as to say that aborigines live in holes in the sand; and as in the case of many misrepresentations, there is some truth in his statement. When the wind is light they scoop up the sand on the windward side and sleep in the depression beside a smouldering fire, and if the wind is cold, a thick wind-break is pushed into the sand. Why should they go to more trouble when they move off the following morning?

[824] In the rainy season nomads become uncomfortably cold and wet and build more elaborate shelters of sticks covered with paper-bark, or of bark from the stringy-bark eucalypt, curved inside out, so that when a number of curved sheets are placed side by side they look like miniature tunnels. Roomy and easily rearranged, these 'balas' suit the winds and rain and sometimes last for the duration of the wet season.

- 364  
[361] Yulengor have no knowledge of sanitation, and they are never in one camp long enough for this form of cleanliness to be forced on them. Refuse and leaves are shovelled on pieces of bark and thrown by the entrance. In cold wet weather shells and food are cooked inside the shelter, and all kinds of waste are thrown on the rapidly increasing midden at the doorway. To camp amidst one's own filth is not regarded as unclean. Before the middens at old camps become overpowering or germinate an exterminating

## MEN OF THE STONE AGE

disease, scarcity of food compels the occupants to look for fresh sites. 364

Well-defined tracks link food-gathering areas and meander in or around jungles and along swamps and creeks wherever there is good hunting. Accompanied by a couple of aboriginal families and a few boys, I followed one of these tracks for about forty miles to where a distant horde had migrated. Men went ahead with their spears, and the women followed with young children, family possessions, and food-gathering dilly-bags. Every little while there was an outbreak of squealing from the women and yelping from the dogs, as a bush rat or other animal was dragged from a hollow log or tree. Occasionally a woman darted off from the track and some miles farther on rejoined the party with a bundle of edible roots or yams. 487  
484  
[224]  
[222]

By sundown we left the bush and came out on a sandy beach on the northern shores of Port Bradshaw, and men and boys were soon lying on the sand waiting for the women to prepare the camps, dig in the sand for fresh water, and cook the shellfish. Once the food was ready, the women took it to their husbands, who shared it with unmarried companions. Darkness comes quickly in the north, and married men settled down with their wives and children around their separate family fires, whilst the unattached males discreetly camped some distance away. Unmarried men always separate themselves from family groups, and any visiting males temporarily without wives stay with the bachelors. Not infrequently married men determine where the bachelors' camp is to be made, and with vivid memories of their own youthful and indiscriminate ways, rigorously enforce this segregation. In the bush, ever-courteous nomads reserved a place for me beside the young men's fire, but never anywhere near a family group, although the youths have sometimes been strangers and the married families well known to me. 361  
589  
[462]  
[312]  
[264]  
[123]

CHAPTER FIVE

*Jungle Lore and Etiquette*

103 Our front door overlooked an alluring crystal-clear stream where it joined the sea. When I asked what the name of the Yirrkala camp meant, I was told: 'Oh, that is the water where the camp is made.' This beach by the sea was a favoured camping-ground and scores of Yulengor drank from the stream. A white man drinks from a bush stream by cupping his hands, or by blowing away the dust on the surface and putting his lips to the water; but Yulengor flip the water into their mouths. Out in the bush, when we were hot and thirsty, we came to a small soak in the hills, whereupon most of the men wandered off for strips of paper-bark or large green leaves from which they drank after deftly twisting them into drinking cups. Scores of these saccules lay around the soak, where they had been used at other times.

[415] Apt terms describe methods of drinking. 'Wiaktun' is used of the baling of a canoe, which is accomplished by throwing the water out in a shell or the cupped hands; and the same word is applied to tossing water into the mouth. 'Dthurara-luptun' is a word-picture of drinking with the lips in the stream, for 'dthurara' is a doorway, river-entrance, or human mouth, and 'luptun' is the present tense of the verb 'to wash'.

752 In spite of the constant use of spears and the skill necessary  
262 in handling them, accidents do occur. Marjirry, a lad of  
224 about sixteen, one day left the station for a day's hunting. He stalked a kangaroo and speared it, but missed all the

## JUNGLE LORE AND ETIQUETTE

touch it, or for his brothers to do so either. The night was hideous with their quarrelling, and though the brothers attacked the old man with their spear-throwers, he loudly proclaimed the tabu and the youths dared not eat the meat.

Sexual intercourse is accepted as a natural function, not to be affected by proximity to the family circle or to other families camped a few feet away, nor yet by occasional unseemly interest from the young men's camp. Even in east Arnhem Land, where a strict morality is outwardly enforced, intercourse is little less than promiscuous, and it is not to be wondered at that most youths laughingly admit their *affaires d'amours*, and that women frequently make the initial advance—though secretly for fear of their husbands.

To prevent irregularities, married men enforce a number of prohibitions, and unmarried and unattached men are segregated in a camp by themselves at a reasonable distance from any family. A woman is not allowed to eat food presented to her husband by a youth, in case he should consider her to be under an obligation to him, and if a youth wishes to share his food with a married brother, he must not go to his camp but must call him over and give it to him.

In many relationships it is unlawful for a man and woman to greet each other, and when I have asked for a name, I have often been greeted by evasion or silence, simply because no one present was allowed to utter the name. Brothers and sisters may not look at each other when speaking, but talk with averted faces. A man converses freely with his wife, mother, daughter, granddaughter, and niece; but when speaking to other relatives he averts his face, and not being able to call them by name he draws their attention by an ejaculation or by saying: 'I wish to

## FROM HAND TO MOUTH

are either fibrous, tasteless, or poisonous, and sometimes they are all three. Three or four varieties are palatable if eaten raw, but become hard and indigestible when cooked. Ingenious methods are used to prepare poisonous yams, which are roasted or steamed before being shredded or pounded into a sticky dough. In one camp I saw women going to endless bother to cook these yams, and imagined that they must be a delicacy, but an old man said they were called 'tchikkyugga'. 'Tchikky' (cheeky, in pidgin English) is used for anything hostile or dangerous, and some beach-comber had probably called this yam a cheeky —, and his description has remained. 262  
[252]

'Bareela' (*Dioscorea Sativa* var) is a dangerously poisonous yam resembling a light-skinned English potato, and it is cooked on hot stones covered with sheets of bark and sand. It is steamed thus for an hour or more before being thrown with certain leaves into a shallow trench which is covered with bark and sand over which a fire is kept alight for between fifteen and eighteen hours. Finally the yams are removed and prepared for consumption by being pounded into a glutinous mass like gritty plasticine. 262  
252

'Jittama' is also a poisonous variety and is shredded on the sharp edges of a snail shell so that the pulp can be packed into a network dilly-bag and soaked in a waterhole. The pulp ferments quickly and must be eaten in the early morning, for if it is kept in the heat or, as the Yulengor say, 'till the sun is over our heads', the children suffer from sick headaches.

In many low-lying areas, hundreds of acres of swamp are covered with ferns, or 'karkor'. These black fibrous roots, similar to bracken roots, are roasted, drawn through the mouth, and chewed to extract the gluey starch. A regular camp of a hundred or more nomads was made each year near such swamps at Cape Arnhem and they lived almost entirely on this unappetizing fibrous root. [361]•

## YULENGOR

262  
[133] Lagoons overflow in the wet season and hundreds of acres  
[222] of low-lying land are under water. It is country where water-  
[252] lilies grow in profusion. Women dive for the root-stocks  
and roast great quantities of them. Lily seed-pods are eaten  
raw, sieved through network dilly-bags, or ground between  
stones and baked into cakes.

The most palatable of all vegetable food is probably the  
corm or swamp rush, 'rarkai', and these swamps are famous  
throughout Arnhem Land. Rarkai rushes cover brackish  
swamps near the coast, and women systematically turn over  
many acres of black mud in their search for the nut. In east  
Arnhem Land I know of several such swamps, each of which  
supported a hundred or even two hundred Yulengor for six  
weeks at a time. During the corm season the hordes make the  
swamps a rendezvous for corroborees, ceremonies, and initia-  
tions. Corms are about the size of marbles, and in addition  
to being the most nutritious of all their vegetable foods they  
possess a pleasant nutty flavour.

[177] Several foods have totemic significance and find a place  
in ceremonial practices. Probably the most important of  
these is 'ngutu', the nut of the cycad palm, and it is said that  
this yellowish brown nut was first eaten by spirit-Ancestors,  
[177] who instructed their daughters in the art of preparing it.  
[462] Legend declares that as the knowledge was received first by  
[222] women, they have for all time to attend to the gathering  
and cooking of all vegetable foods.

262  
252 Hard-shelled cycad nuts are cracked between stones, and  
the kernels soaked in water for three or even five days. Most  
of the poison is thus leached out, and the pulp is wrapped in  
bark and buried in hot sand over which a fire is lit. Cycad  
meal can be baked into flat coarse cakes that sometimes  
weigh up to fifteen pounds, that keep for days, and can be  
carried long distances for use at ceremonial gatherings.  
[574] 'Ngutu' has sustaining properties, and Yulengor live on it  
for weeks as they prepare for inter-tribal corroborees.

## YULENGOR

192 and a school-teacher becomes 'rorm-gurrpan-a-mirry'.  
 [197]

Aboriginal dialects are picturesque, and the same terms are used for objects possessing some similarity; thus, twenty or more names for parts of the body are used for trees and geographical formations. A backbone is the same as a mountain chain; the nose on men, animals, and fish is the same as a peninsular, a cape, or the bow of a boat or canoe; arms, wings, limbs of trees, and tributary streams are all called 'werrna'. A main river stream is called throat. Wounds and sores are classed with holes in utensils, canoes, huts, or clothing.

When human conditions resemble natural phenomena, this process is reversed, and the adjective blunt, 'dumuk', is used for a bush track through thick scrub; a man, too, may be 'blunt' or dull of hearing or intellect and understanding; the word is also in everyday use to describe a blunt axe or knife. Hollow logs or burial posts are 'dupun', and in a mild form of abuse a nomad may be called 'dupun' or empty-headed.

[578]  
 103 Scores of appropriate place-names occur throughout the country, but it is not surprising that there are also hundreds of other euphonious names having no particular significance, for along the coast and on the countless bush tracks, every waterhole, swamp, hill, river crossing, and ancient camp site has a name. 'Rungi' could be a falling tide, low tide, or an exposed beach, and there are many coastal names linked with rungi. West Arnhem Land is known for its low lying  
 [133] swamps and mudflats, but in the north-east there is a startling change to clean, sandy beaches with bold headlands, and the latter area is called 'Rungi-Poingar'—'the place of

[361] beaches'. Most camps are made on beaches or sandy patches in the bush, but a horde in Blue Mud Bay haunts an outcrop of stone and clay far out on a mangrove mud flat, and consequently their camp is known as 'Lokor-Poingar'—'the place of feet'; and the reference is to the spreading mangrove roots or feet.

## BURIAL RITES AND CANNIBALISM

are painted on the clean smooth skull. Bones are often 765  
carried for years in long bark parcels, and women wail over  
them at any hour of the day or night. Once this poignancy  
passes, the ceremonies are completed, and an inter-tribal  
gathering is regarded as suitable for a bone-burial; several [628]  
skeletons may be interred in the one post. These long hollow  
burial-posts are cut from the hollow trunks of gum trees;  
scraped smooth, and carefully painted with designs and [531]  
symbols descriptive of totem centres. Mourning ceremonies  
are conducted each night until the bones are packed inside;  
skulls and large bones are broken up to conserve space and  
each bone is realistically rammed into place. At one burial  
ceremony I could not understand why one horde painted  
the skull and another horde dressed body bones, and it  
was explained that the bones belonged to one horde and  
the skull to another. This skull should have been interred  
ten years previously, when the skeleton was packed in a  
burial post, but the women did not want to part with it  
and had kept it till the present ceremony.

With a shout men close in on the burial post and run with  
it to a small hole in the sand, where it is erected and rammed  
into place, to stand about twelve feet above ground. In a  
frenzy of emotion, men dance round it in a final benediction  
and are encouraged by intensified wailing from the women.  
An unnatural silence follows the dance, for it concludes  
abruptly when the leader says simply: 'It is finished.' No  
further interest is taken in the bones even if the post later  
topples over and they are scattered on the sand.

Skeletons on the Wessel Islands and Woodah Island are  
deposited in caves. Scores of bats hung from the roof and  
fluttered into the sunlight when I went into this cave of the  
dead on Woodah Island. Skulls lay around in all stages of  
disintegration, and on the floor there was a pile of bone dust  
almost two feet high. A large horde once lived here, but 361●  
now, apart from those who occasionally come over from the

## YULENGOR

- 361 mainland to hunt for turtle eggs, the island is deserted.
- 266  
M3  
[764] I saw hordes behind Boucaut Bay practising a form of cannibalism and eating their dead. A wealth of tradition lies behind this custom, which originated with the eating of their tribal Ancestress. This prehistoric giantess came from the west and finished her labours at Boucaut Bay, where she made a plain and a swamp full of vegetable food and fish. Near by she bore children and established the local hordes. Many years later the Goddess died and left the horde the problem of disposing of her body. She had been an active Goddess, and the hordes had depended on her, and now, as they had no desire to lose the prestige she had given them, they retained her strength by eating her body.

266  
764 The precedent of the Goddess is advanced as the reason for continuing the custom of eating dead relatives and enemies killed in battle. All hair is scraped off and burnt, intestines are removed and buried, and the head is severed from the trunk. Meanwhile relatives prepare an oven [552] by digging a trench, lining it with stones, and lighting a fire on top. When the tempo of singing and dancing has increased to fever-pitch, the skull is pierced and the brain removed, wrapped in bark, and given to the mother to guard. The skull is cooked, separately cleaned, painted, and hoarded. Removing the bones is a lengthy process and must be done carefully so as not to sever the limbs. All bones are exposed in a tree to bleach before being painted and hoarded till it is convenient to pack them in a burial-post.

[533] When the stones in the trench are hot, the coals are scraped away, and a relative grasps the hands of the now boneless and headless body, drapes it over his shoulders and dances among the chanting, wailing horde. It is lowered into the trench-oven, covered with bark and sand and allowed to cook to the accompaniment of singing and dancing. Most chants relate to the departing spirit, and in